A LETTER

TO

SIR ROBERT BERNARD, BART.

Chairman of the Huntingdonſhire Committee.

SIR,

THE Delegation being cloſed by a reſolution of its members, upon Saturday the 21ſt ult. I think it now incumbent upon me to explain the principles, upon which I conducted myſelf in the diſcharge of an office, to which the partiality of yourſelf, and the other gentlemen of the Huntingdonſhire Committee, had a ſecond time appointed me.

Although I was perſuaded, that an Houſe of Commons, conſtituted as the preſent, would never be induced by the ſupplications of the people to take an active part in diminiſhing the influence of the Crown, yet I thought it my duty to concur in an application to that purpoſe; perceiving it to be the general opinion of the delegates, that ſuch application ſhould take the lead of what I own has always appeared to me the moſt eligible plan of reformation—I mean

that ſubſtantial reform in the repreſentative body, which in the higheſt degree it concerns the people to advert to—a reform more practicable than is generally apprehended, and which to my underſtanding ſuggeſts the only hope of political ſalvation.

I muſt confeſs, it was with reluctance I conſented to the idea of keeping out of ſight our delegated character in the title of the Petition, lately preſented to the Commons Houſe of Parliament.—It was with equal reluctance I conſented to wave the inſertion of ſome other circumſtances, reſpecting the finance of this country, which ſeemed to me to call more loudly for parliamentary reprehenſion, than any hitherto noticed in the petitions of the people.

It was alſo with difficulty I perſuaded myſelf to adopt a ſtile in my idea too humble for ſuch an occaſion—in an addreſs to the ſervants of the people—to a body of men, of whom I verily believed the majority had already, in the ſhort period that hath elapſed ſince their election, more than once manifeſted an utter diſregard to the intereſts of their conſtituents.

Urged by the force of theſe impreſſions, I declared my ſentiments with that freedom which became your delegate—but I reflected, that if unanimity was ever deſirable, it was peculiarly ſo at the outſet of our undertaking.

ing. I therefore acquieſced in the idea of petitioning as a freeholder of your county, and conceded to the general wiſh of abiding by a form, which, it was urged, had already received the ſanction of a very conſiderable part of the community.

It was with heartfelt pleaſure that I was witneſs to the well-informed zeal, with which the worthy Deputies of Yorkſhire opened and ſupported the plan of parliamentary reformation, announced in the addreſs of their Committee, and that ſpirit of patriotiſm, with which their idea was generally adopted by the aſſembly.

To the firſt part of that plan, which propoſed the addition of at leaſt one hundred members, to be choſen in due proportion in the ſeveral counties of this kingdom, I gave my concurrence; being inclined to hope, that ſuch an inſtitution, which had already been approved by many of the aſſociated counties, might be ſalutary in its conſequences; and not inconſiſtent with thoſe more enlarged ſchemes of reformation, which I truſt the ſpirit and good ſenſe of the Engliſh nation will hereafter carry into effect.

But, in order that my ſubſequent conduct may appear in its proper point of view, I requeſt the indulgent attention of the Committee to the following conſiderations:

It ſeemed to be the general opinion of the delegates, that parliamentary freedom and independence might be reſtored by an improved arrangement of the preſent electors of this kingdom. I did not therefore controvert the idea in this ſtage of the buſineſs—I concurred with them in practice as far as they went—but my theory led me to more extenſive concluſions.

I conſidered that the perſons, who at preſent exerciſe the power of election in the name of the people of England, might be diſtributed into three claſſes *.

In the firſt claſs would be contained thoſe inhabitants of this kingdom, who poſſeſs freeholds to the amount of forty ſhillings a year and upwards, ſuppoſed to be in number 130,000, and electing 92 members to ſerve for 52 counties.

The ſecond claſs would comprehend 43,000 citizens, freemen and others, who elect 52 members for 23 cities and 2 univerſities.

In the third or laſt claſs would be found 41,000 electors, who chooſe 369 members for 192 towns and boroughs.

It was propoſed by the Deputies of York-

* Report of the Weſtminſter Committee, dated March 19, 1780.

ſhire,

ſhire, that the members elected by the 130,000 freeholders ſhould amount at the leaſt to 192.

As a further barrier againſt undue influence, I propoſed that one hundred ſhould be ſubtracted from the 369 burgeſſes choſen at preſent by the 41,000 electors, in order that the ſum total of the members elected by the preſent freeholders, citizens, freemen, burgeſſes, and other electors of England, might remain the ſame as before.

The motion was not ſupported—the reaſons that induced me to propoſe this alteration are as follows:

In the firſt place it appeared to me, that the Houſe of Commons is already ſufficiently numerous for all the purpoſes of its inſtitution. In the happieſt periods of our hiſtory its number was far inferior to what it is at preſent: and it has been ably obſerved, that with the increaſe of its members would in all probability be increaſed the national depravity, and the expence of the public; ‡ unleſs at the ſame time ſuch meaſures were embraced, as by ſubjecting

‡ The Reſolution, actually aſſented to by the Delegation, propoſes that the additional members ſhould be choſen in due proportion, in the ſeveral cities as well as counties of the kingdom——A proviſion which rather ſtrengthens than impairs the argument in favour of a diminution of the borough members.

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the repreſentative to the controul of the conſtituent, would neceſſarily place him beyond the power of corruption.

I ſecondly reflected that the perſons, who elect the 369 members to ſerve for the towns and boroughs of the kingdom, are the moſt dependent part of the nation; and are acknowledged to be in every reſpect the leaſt worthy of being intruſted with the exerciſe of ſo important a power as they at preſent enjoy, to the great injury of the landed and commercial intereſts of this country.

In the next place I conſidered, that the popular ſentiment ſeemed more favourable to the idea of diminiſhing the number of the Borough members, than to the propoſed augmentation in the counties. And although it was alledged, that in caſe this idea were adopted, we ſhould have the intereſt of the proprietors of boroughs to contend with, it appeared to me ſuch intereſt might be purchaſed in many inſtances by a proper compenſation; and that even in caſe ſome reluctance ſhould be manifeſted by any of the parties concerned, ſuch perſons would probably not continue to oppoſe the general wiſh, when they reflected, that the power they enjoyed was utterly inconſiſtent with the people's undoubted right to an equal repreſentation, whenever they might think proper to aſſert it.

In propoſing this improvement, I proceeded upon the idea, adopted by my brethren of the delegation. But in fact I eſteem all propoſitions for an improved arrangement of the preſent voters of this kingdom, in no further degree worthy of the attention of the public, than as they are preparatory ſteps to that complete reformation, which I am now more than ever perſuaded might be effected by the peaceful efforts of the people, acting by their Committees, and uniting in a general aſſociation to ſupport their reſolves.

I am, as will afterwards more fully appear, decidedly of opinion, that an Engliſh Houſe of Commons ſhould be a repreſentation of perſons, not of property—of men, not of things—and that there is no neceſſity for the delegation of the important right of election to any portion of the community, intermediate between the repreſentative and the great collective body of the people. But ſuppoſing theſe points were to be conceded, and ſuppoſing the ſum total of the ſtanding electors of this kingdom, who are at preſent allowed to exerciſe this power in derogation of the right of more than a million of their fellow-citizens, now excluded from their franchiſe, were to remain as at this day, it may reaſonably be demanded, whether the 130,000 freeholders who now enjoy the

privilege

privilege of electing 92 members, are the perſons, whom the landed intereſt would depute for this important purpoſe? Whether there be not a large proportion of them, who, notwithſtanding their legal qualification, cannot claim, from their ſtation in life, this great pre-eminence—and whether many copyholders are not rejected in the preſent ſyſtem, whoſe independent circumſtances would render them fitter objects of this truſt?

With reſpect to the 84,000 citizens, burgeſſes, and other inhabitants of England, who elect the remaining 421 members, can we ſeriouſly maintain, that they properly repreſent the various branches of the commercial intereſt of this country? And can it be imagined, that the liberties and properties of more than five millions of people can be ſafe, when intruſted in the hands of repreſentatives, of whom it has been demonſtrated the majority may be returned by a number of electors leſs than 6000, conſiſting in general of the moſt dependent, the moſt venal, and the moſt worthleſs of the ſpecies? *

I will diſmiſs the ſubject of repreſentation for the preſent, and proceed to the next object of Parliamentary reformation propo-

* See Burgh's Political Diſquiſitions, Vol. I. c. 4. and Mr. Wilkes's admirable Speech in favour of a more equal repreſentation of the people.

ſed by the Yorkſhire Committee, viz. the ſhortening the duration of Parliaments to a period not exceeding three years.

I had the pleaſure of concurring with the delegates in their firſt reſolution reſpecting this ſubject.—The propriety of the meaſure was ably debated, and the general ſentiment decidedly in its favour.—The reſolution, as moved by Sir James Norcliff, was as follows:

"RESOLVED,

That the bill, enacting the Septennial duration of Parliaments, was a violation of the rights of the people, by which the conſtitutional connection between the conſtituent body and the repreſentative has been impaired, and the Parliament expoſed to great and ſyſtematic corruption."

This reſolution paſſed with the following amendments—After the words *Septennial duration of Parliaments* was inſerted, "however expedient it might have been rendered by the circumſtances of the times," and inſtead of *ſyſtematic corruption* was ſubſtituted "unconſtitutional influence." I do not conceive theſe alterations to have been real improvements of this motion.

I have always imagined the Triennial bill to be equally a violation of the conſtitution with the Septennial. I conceive alſo that the proper buſineſs of a repreſentative, as indeed is

evident from the tenor of the antient writs, is to act as an agent for his conſtituents in the great aſſembly of the nation: it therefore appears abſurd to ſuppoſe, that the ſenſe of the people, at any particular period, can properly be expreſſed in that aſſembly, by perſons delegated, as it might happen, nearly three years before the actual iſſuing of the yearly proclamation for its convention.

Urged by the force of theſe reflections, I made the following motion, which, for want of being ſupported, occaſioned no debate:

"RESOLVED,

That the people of England have an undoubted right to an Annual election of members to ſerve in the Commons Houſe of Parliament—and that the act of the ſixth of William the Third, which afforded the firſt legal ſanction to the duration of Parliaments beyond a ſingle ſeſſion, was ſubverſive of the conſtitution, and a violation on the part of the repreſentatives of the ſacred truſt repoſed in them by their conſtituents."

It was with pain I differed from the Yorkſhire gentlemen, and the majority of the deputation in the ſubſequent reſolution, which is now ſubjoined;

"RESOLVED,

That when by the peaceful and legal efforts of the people, a more frugal management of the public purſe, and a more adequate

quate repreſentation in Parliament ſhall have been obtained, the repeal of the Septennial bill would form a ſtrong barrier againſt the inroads of Parliamentary corruption, and the alarming influence of the Crown."

I will not trouble the Committee with a recital of the various reaſons, which induced me to oppoſe the paſſing of this reſolution—They were very different, I believe, from thoſe which influenced the two other deputations, who concurred with me on this occaſion. It may be ſufficient for the preſent to obſerve, that with ſome formality I declared, that I objected to this motion, "becauſe it poſtpones the redreſs of an acknowledged violation of the conſtitution, until that more frugal management of the public purſe ſhall have been obtained, which I am perſuaded the controlling power of a Commons Houſe of Parliament, elected in conformity to antient uſage, ſolely can effect."

Previouſly to my ſtatement of the laſt motion I made in the aſſembly of delegates, I would beg leave to ſubmit to you the following conſiderations in the form of queries. If they ſhould not have ſo much weight with the Committee as they had with me, they may yet convince the gentlemen who compoſe it, that I did not act without reflection, and that if my conduct was erroneous, my intentions were nevertheleſs ſincere.

1. Is it practicable to aſſign to the preſent 214,000 electors of England any ſuch new arrangement, as ſhall render it poſſible for them to return a free and independent Commons Houſe of Parliament?

2. Does not the mode of electing two members for each county of this kingdom, however varying in extent and population, beſides the obvious inequality it introduces into the repreſentation, alſo give riſe, eſpecially in the larger counties, to that riot, confuſion, and undue influence, which might effectually be removed by a new allotment into diſtricts, each containing as much as may be the ſame number of inhabitants, and electing one member?

3. Do not the petitions to Parliament, reſpecting conteſted elections in boroughs, almoſt intirely ariſe from the various qualifications annexed to the right of voting? and therefore would not theſe conteſts, which form one of the ſtrongeſt objections to the revival of the antient conſtitutional Parliaments of a ſingle ſeſſion, be almoſt unknown, if the legal age of the citizen were conſidered as the only qualification of the voter?

4. Is there any abſolute neceſſity for having recourſe to the Houſe of Commons in order to re-eſtabliſh the inhabitants of this country in their undoubted right to an equal, annual, and univerſal repreſentation of themſelves

ſelves in Parliament? and would not an act of delegates freely choſen by the people, aſſented to by the king and hereditary nobility, be ſufficient for this purpoſe? *

5. Is it not the duty of all men who wiſh well to their country, and have influence in the community, to ſtate the ſubſtantial rights of the people, and to uſe ſuch arguments as may induce them by every legal and conſtitutional method to aſſert them? †

6. Is it not much more likely that the commonalty of England, when national diſtreſs ſhall have awakened them to a ſenſe of their own miſconduct, would embrace a mode of reformation, which actually reinſtates

* In my addreſs to the freeholders of Middleſex, printed at the cloſe of the year 1779, this queſtion is treated more diffuſely.—I am ſatisfied the doctrine, maintained in that tract, is truly conſtitutional, and might be reduced to practice by the peaceable efforts of the people.

† If that body of our fellow-citizens, who for many years have oppoſed in the Commons' Houſe of Parliament the ruinous meaſures of the preſent adminiſtration, were ſolemnly to ſecede from an aſſembly, in which it is impoſſible for argument, aided by the ſublimeſt eloquence, to be of any avail—and, aſſembling the counties, would explain the grounds of their ſeceſſion, and declare their perſuaſion, that the laſt hope of England now reſts on the conſtituiional exertions of the collective body of the people, they would certainly diſcharge the duty they owe to their conſtituents, and probably preſerve their country from impending deſtruction.

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them in the poſſeſſion of an important franchiſe, than that they ſhould intereſt themſelves in the eſtabliſhment of a ſyſtem of meaſures, of which it requires a long train of circuitous reaſoning to demonſtrate to them the uſe?

The motion grounded on the doctrine contained in the preceding queries, the greateſt part of which I with pleaſure acknowledge I have been led to adopt in conſequence of the incomparable publications of Major Cartwright, was as follows:

"Whereas, after ſolemn argument and the moſt diſpaſſionate diſcuſſion, it appears to this aſſembly, that the right of election for members to ſerve in the Commons' Houſe of Parliament (which at preſent, to the great detriment of the nation, is unwarrantably exerciſed by an inconſiderable portion of the community, in many reſpects incompetent to the diſcharge of ſo important a truſt) doth in truth conſtitutionally appertain to, and might conveniently be exerciſed by every male inhabitant of the kingdom, arrived at the legal age of diſcretion.—And whereas the people in their collective capacity (by reaſon that the voice of the commonalty of England is no leſs neceſſary to every legiſlative purpoſe, than that of either the king or the lords) have a juſt and inherent right to correct the abuſes of par-

parliamentary repreſentation, whenever ſuch abuſes ſhall have ſo increaſed, as to rob them of their conſtitutional ſhare in their own government;

"RESOLVED,

That it be recommended to the Committees of Correſpondence, eſtabliſhed in this kingdom, to carry into immediate effect the proper meaſures, for collecting the free and unbiaſſed ſenſe of the inhabitants of the ſeveral counties, cities, and boroughs of England, reſpecting the preſent unconſtitutional infringements of their election franchiſes, and the means that ſhould be employed for their recovery."

I prefaced this motion with a defence of the principles upon which it was founded. I entered largely into the practicability and expediency of the meaſure—and urged, that, as no alterations ought to be attempted, which did not meet with the full concurrence of the people, it was neceſſary to adopt the proper means for collecting the ſenſe of the people;—but this motion alſo not being ſupported occaſioned no debate.

A motion being then made for the immediate diſſolution of our aſſembly, I thought it my duty to oppoſe it. I wiſhed that we might continue in exiſtence until we were enabled, at leaſt, to report the [illegible] petition; but I was unſupported in my oppoſition, and the meeting was diſſolved.

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I cannot be unconſcious, that, from my own report, I ſtand expoſed to the charge of ſingularity in many parts of my conduct—I regard it as a misfortune—the gentlemen of the Delegation are deſervedly reſpected—in point of integrity, ability, and public ſpirit, they cannot have more ſincere and zealous admirers than myſelf. With many of them I am united in the ſtricteſt bonds of friendſhip; and I can truly ſay, I felt more poignant uneaſineſs, from my not being able to concur with them in ſentiment, than I ſhould have experienced of apprehenſion, had it been my lot to have ſtood ſingle amidſt an hoſt of foes.

It is poſſible, but I deliver it only as matter of opinion, that ſome gentlemen in the delegation might think it prudent for us to inſiſt only on a portion of what might juſtly be demanded, for the purpoſe of conciliating the favourable attention of a powerful party to our views. But it may not be unuſeful to reflect, that we are agents for the democratical part of the Conſtitution, and that it is not reaſonable to expect, that we ſhall be ſtrenuouſly ſupported by the nobility, unleſs when the common danger ſhall become extreme—in ſuch circumſtances the virtuous part of the nobility will unite with us. When that danger is at a diſtance, retaining the natural prejudices of their order, they will not be ſanguine in our

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cauſe—I ſay this with an exception of ſome elevated characters, whoſe generoſity of ſentiment in ſupporting the rights of the people is above my praiſe.

With reſpect to the commonalty at large, I am ſatisfied the preſent languor of patriotiſm did not originate with them—they were inclined in the laſt year to adopt the moſt ſpirited meaſures—but, through the want of concord in their leaders, they now, alas! know not in whom they can confide.

I am not an advocate for an intemperate expreſſion of zeal, nor inclined to appeal even to the conſtitutional powers of the people upon trivial occaſions, and without a proſpect of ſucceſs. But I am ſatisfied that a timely declaration of the popular ſentiment, reſpecting the long violated rights of repreſentation, would be the moſt likely method of preventing the further inroads of deſpotiſm, and the final ruin of the ſtate *.

Ever ſince I took a part in politics, I have eſteemed it my duty to avow, and to

* With ſuch a declaration might with propriety be combined a remonſtrance againſt the continuance of the American war, and a diſavowal of the principles and practices, which gave occaſion to its commencement. Such a declaration, expreſſed in manly yet reſpectful language to the throne, though it might not bend certain of thoſe inflexible ſpirits who ſurround it, would probably diſpoſe the hearts of our American brethren to peace, and to the conceſſion of many commercial advantages in their power to grant, as a free and independent people.

bring forward, to the utmoſt of my power, thoſe maxims, which I believed would promote the peace and proſperity of my country. In political and religious diſquiſitions, as well as in philoſophical, it is ſurely a point of prudence to encourage a free communication of ſuch hints, as, in the opinion of the propoſers, may benefit mankind. Many doctrines, now univerſally received, were at one time the opinions of a few private individuals, which, though for a time oppoſed by the combinations of intereſt, an open appeal to the good ſenſe of the community, at length hath carried into effect.—An unreſerved communication of ſentiments is eſſential to freedom of diſcuſſion—and that perſevering unanimity, which is the reſult of conviction, can flouriſh only where a free diſcuſſion hath previouſly prevailed.—For theſe reaſons I conceive that the moment, in which truth firſt ſuggeſts itſelf to the mind, is the proper ſeaſon for declaring it.

With regard to the inſtance before us, the matter may be brought to this ſhort iſſue; whether it be more expedient to with-hold a doctrine conducive to the intereſts of the people—to ſuſpend our exertions in a cauſe demonſtrably juſt, becauſe ſuch doctrine or ſuch exertions may poſſibly be offenſive to perſons, whom we might wiſh to conciliate—

ciliate——Or, relying on thoſe energies, which an open avowal of political truth would moſt probably excite in the breaſts of Engliſhmen of every deſcription, intrepidly aſſert it in the face of our country, regardleſs of oppoſition from whatever quarter it may ariſe. This is a queſtion which futurity may probably decide,—† My own ſentiments

† It has, of late years, been too much the cuſtom with men of every deſcription, to expreſs an unfavourable opinion of the general diſpoſition of the Engliſh people.—They have been repeatedly repreſented as ſtrangers to principle in virtue and religion, and totally degenerate with regard to the love of liberty and public ſpirit.

I can by no means aſſent to a poſition, which exhibits my fellow-citizens in ſo unpleaſing a point of view——I am perſuaded, that the contrary is a fact. I am perſuaded, that there does not only exiſt ſufficient virtue in this country to preſerve what is left of the forms of the conſtitution, but that there alſo remains ſuch a portion of public ſpirit, as, under proper direction, would reſtore that conſtitution to its primæval integrity and ſplendor.

When the brave and injured Keppel endured that memorable conflict, to which the arts of baſe detraction had expoſed him, with a firmneſs and compoſure, which conſcious innocence could alone afford——What were the ſentiments, that occupied the minds of the attentive audience at that important hour? Reſpect for injured merit, ſtrong reſentment, and anxious expectation, by turns maintained the intire poſſeſſion of their ſouls? And at the moment of his acquittal, when ſurrounded by his fellow-citizens, he obtained a triumph, more truly honourable, more truly glorious, than England yet had witneſſed, did not a ſpirit, manly and exalted as his own, inform each Engliſh breaſt?

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timents are ſufficiently apparent; and I truſt this avowal of them will be received with candour by yourſelf and the other gentlemen of the Committee, to whom, with the utmoſt reſpect and moſt cordial good wiſhes, they are addreſſed by their

Devoted humble ſervant,

JOHN JEBB.

Craven-ſtreet,
13th May, 1781.

Nor were theſe ſentiments of more than Roman virtue confined to the ſpectators of this affecting ſcene—they diffuſed themſelves with reſiſtleſs energy to the remoteſt quarters of the iſland—and while the meaneſt of the multitude felt thoſe generous emotions, which public virtue only can inſpire, DECUS ET TUTAMEN, the proper motto of nobility, appeared to be inſcribed in ſplendid characters on each illuſtrious brow.

Is it poſſible that my fellow-citizens, who intereſted themſelves ſo warmly in the cauſe of injured virtue, ſhould remain utterly inſenſible, when their country calls? Can a nation, thus feeling for another's honour, long continue regardleſs of its own?

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